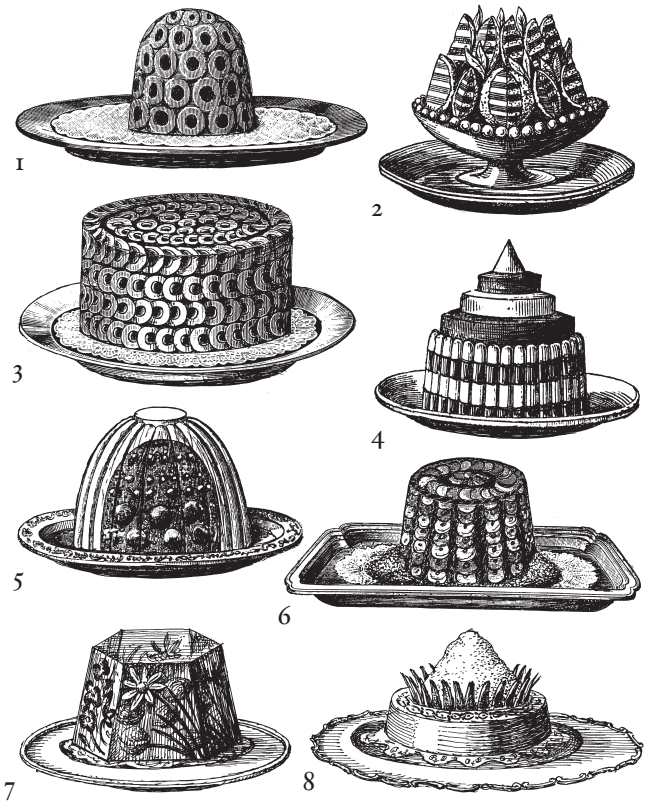
JELLIES & THEIR MOULDS



Frontispiece. Classic jellies of the Victorian period: (1) Mosaic of lemon jelly and custard, 1891; (2) Oranges à la Bellevue, 1855; (3) Timbale à la Versailles, 1891; (4) Ribbon jelly, 1855; (5) Macédoine jelly, 1855; (6) Bavaroise à la Impériale, 1891; (7) Jelly à l'Andalouse, c. *1900; (8) Rice à la Parisienne, 1888.*

THE ENGLISH KITCHEN

JELLIES & THEIR MOULDS

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Peter Brears,
Leeds 2010





INTRODUCTION

Today's jellies tend to fall into the cheap and cheerful category of food. You can buy a basic pack of soluble flavoured jelly squares for 9p in some supermarkets, and it only takes a couple of minutes to dissolve them in hot water, pour them into a bowl and leave them to set to provide a treat for the kids. This approach is economical, trouble-free and efficient, but it completely undervalues and underplays the true potential of probably our most versatile and exciting of foodstuffs.

Jellies are unique in their range of physical properties. Although they are virtually tasteless, they can instantly absorb any chosen flavour drawn from fruits and spices, as well as readily dissolving sugars, wines and spirits throughout their mass. Having no texture of their own, they can take on those of creams, cereals, fruit purées, ground nuts and many other things, or they can be whipped up into foams. They can also be used to embed fresh, preserved or candied fruits, or stiff custards and other jellies of contrasting flavour and colour. Being colourless at the outset, they immediately take on the widest variety of tones, tinctures and degrees of opacity as imparted by all manner of edible liquids and colourings. They have no shape of their own, but take on the shape of any mould or vessel into which they are poured. This list of attributes is already impressive, but has yet to include their final most important and unique characteristics. The first of these is perfect transparency. No other food is so capable of allowing light to pass through it, reflected and refracted by the facets of its outer surfaces. The second is dynamic movement, the wobble factor, always a delight to the eye. The third, just as important, is their capacity

to slowly release their flavours and textures into the mouth, prolonging the pleasure and appreciation of ingredients which otherwise would be much more rapidly swallowed.

Over the last seven hundred years generations of cooks have laboured hard and long to convert the most unpromising of waste animal products into the finest luxurious, succulent, attractive and delicious high-status jellies. In the courts of medieval and Tudor England, they were only served at the tables of kings, queens, princes and nobles, so great was their prestige. Their use then slowly percolated to the gentry class below, before entering into general use with the introduction of prepared gelatins in the mid-nineteenth century.

My first detailed study of early jellies started in 1995 with a 'phone call from Beverley Wigg of Team Saatchi, who had been commissioned by the Gelatine Manufacturers of Europe to promote jelly-making in the home. The approach was to be historical, restoring the lost status of jellies by recreating the most impressive examples in the kitchens of great country houses. Unfortunately, it seemed no-one knew anything about early jellies, and no country-house owners were interested in the project. Having myself researched, trialled and published some initial studies of jellies, as well as being involved in the restoration of some large country-house kitchens, I was asked to meet the clients and see what could be done. The result was Britain's first Jelly Festival, which took place at Petworth House, Sussex, in the first week of August 1995.

Living and working in the original servants' quarters, we spent a few days recreating the most interesting jellies made between the 1390s and 1930s, only to discover that virtually none had set sufficiently to be turned out, since this was one of the hottest summers on record. Much re-melting and re-moulding with stronger gelatins followed, so that there were approaching a hundred jellies ranged along the great kitchen table and dressers on the first morning. As soon as the doors opened and members of the public began to flow through, it

was obvious that it was going to be a great success. Everyone looked remarkably happy, grandparents seeing jellies which brought back memories of past events which had involved jellies, and children looking in wide-eyed wonder at the jelly lions or bunny-rabbits feasting on jelly grass and carrots. There was also great conversation between the generations, and lots of repartee between visitors and cooks. The message was clear, English people still love a good jelly. So do the press.

Both national and local media were 'All of a Quiver!' with these 'Jelly Japes', 'Shaking all over' as we were 'Breaking the Mould', explaining 'The Shape of Things to Come' in this 'Perfect Setting'. The festival was 'Jelly Good Fun' and we were all 'Jelly Good Fellows', going 'Great Shakes' and even 'Throwing a Wobbly!' Such raucous reportage was just what was needed. Jelly was back in the news. This event lasted a week, and was enjoyed by many hundreds of visitors, similar crowds coming to subsequent festivals at Harewood House near Leeds over Easter 1996, and at Syon House over Easter 1997. In the meantime *Country Life* informed me that I was now one of their 'Living National Treasures' as a 'Traditional English Jelly-maker', later, thankfully, modified to 'Food Historian'.

About this time, late one evening, someone with a deep and strong Northern Irish accent 'phoned to ask, 'Are you the jelly person?' This sent a shiver down my spine. In the mid-1970s I had stood in my museum and watched the minutes tick by the deadline for an IRA bomb threat, which the British security forces had informed me was probably real; did the man want 'jelly' or 'gelli'? On asking who was calling, I was told it was Chivers of Ireland: 'Could you do for the Irish jelly what you've done for the English jelly?' The result was one of the most enjoyable of all jelly experiences. It was arranged for me to do a week of historic jelly demonstrations in an elegant Georgian town-house hotel in Dublin in July 1996, with full media coverage. Just before departing, Chivers rang to confirm the arrangements, then announcing that the venue had been changed.

'Why?'

'The orang-utan!' Apparently this recently-born primate had been rejected by its parents and was being nurtured by the keepers. 'It's in bed with them, wearing nappies, feeding from the bottle, and loads of folk are going to see it, so we've cancelled your place at the hotel, and put you in the Zoo with the monkeys.'

Although unexpected, this was good promotional policy. Over the next week, the staff at Dublin Zoo's kitchens gave me a great welcome, a bench to myself, and full access to their fine refrigerated larder. It was hard work, but enormous fun; punctuated by demonstration sessions for the food-writers of Ireland and the nation's media, the most delightfully enthusiastic and intelligent of audiences. The long tables of jellies, both English and Irish, created much interest and conversation, 'Why had I adopted such an injellyectual approach?'

The television reporter from RTE couldn't understand why a foaming pint of Guinness stood amid the jellies.

'What's the black stuff doing there?'

'It's a jelly.'

'No it isn't – its the Black Stuff – I should know.'

'It's a jelly.'

'Prove it.'

At this point the glass was turned upside down, the Guinness and its foam remaining firmly in place.

'Dear God! The Englishman has jellified the Guinness! Why, on earth would anyone want to do a thing like that?'

Its potential for being consumed while lying helplessly horizontal at the end of a night of social inebriation was then explained, the point taken, the new product sampled, and pronounced good.

Surely no other foodstuff could ever create such careless happiness, frivolity and enjoyment. However, jelly has its serious side too. I published the first outline study of its seven-hundred year history as 'Transparent Pleasures – The Story of

the Jelly' in *Petits Propos Culinaires,* volumes 53 and 54, in 1996–7. This went on to win the Oxford Symposium on Food and Food History's Sophie Coe Prize in 1997. The present book extends the story and provides greater detail. In order to be as practical as possible, the majority of the historic recipes have been re-written in modern form, but follow closely the working methods and proportions of ingredients in the original texts. Where gelatin was specified, the same proportions have been retained, although they may need to be adapted to meet the setting qualities of modern gelatin, or particular temperature conditions when serving. Where the earlier recipes start off with calf's feet, hart's horn, ivory dust or isinglass, however, their place has been taken by an appropriate quantity of gelatin as a workable alternative.

The recipes are arranged in approximate date order, convenient for those who wish to make jellies to form part of a recreated meal of any chosen period. The same approach is taken for the moulds. Reproductions of pages from manufacturers' and retailers' catalogues also offer a substantial amount of new information for all those who collect them as a hobby. Where moulds are known to have been made for the production of a particular jelly, the associated recipe is also given, thus uniting the frequently disparate worlds of the cook and the collector.